

# DANCES OF KARACHAY PEOPLE LIVING IN TURKEY

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### Introduction:

Today in Turkey many different nationalities from many different continents such as Africa, America, Europe, Caucasian, Transcaucasia, Asia as well as Asia-minor live in peace side by side. Although some of these nationalities such as Americans, Russians, Europeans, Africans, Arabs and some others have moved to Turkey in the recent couple of decades on their own pleasure, some of the others had to migrate. For example, many of the Caucasian tribes from Northern part of Caucasus Mountains as well as Trans-Caucasian peoples such as Azerbaijanis and Georgians were forced by Russians to migrate to the Ottoman land which created extra problems besides the economic and political difficulties that Ottomans had. *“During its weakest economic and political era, Ottoman Empire had confronted by a great migration of Muslim and Turkish speaking people from Caucasus, Krimea and the Balkans who brought their tangible and intangible cultural assets with them. Thus, every ethnic group with their language, religion and traditions had started a new life in the Ottoman land.”* Stated a colleague of mine at another symposium regarding the difficult times that Ottomans had in time.<sup>3</sup>

Most of these Caucasian tribes were moving in mass populations: in 1861 Daghestanians, between 1863 – 1864 Adiges, Abhazaian, all of the Ubih tribe, many of Abzeh, Shapsığ, Natuhay, Jane, Temirgoys and almost half of Besleneys migrated to the Ottoman land. While most of Kabardinians were not affected by this migration and chose to stay in Caucasasia, some migrated. The other big wave of migration from Caucasasia started around 1877 and 1878, and continued until after the war between Ottomans and Russia. During this era most of Karachay-Malkars who lived on the skirts of famous Elbrus Mountain migrated.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, between 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century more than 600 thousand people migrated to Ottoman land which is the modern Turkey now. Due to this big migration many tribes of Caucasian as well as Trans-Caucasian people live in Turkey. There fore, today Turkey contains a broad mixture of Caucasian as well as Trans-Caucasian traditions within its culture.

### The Roots and Cultural Background of Karachay People:

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<sup>3</sup> KOÇKAR, M. Tekin. “Teknolojik Gelişmelerin Halk Kültüründeki Değişime Etkisi: Ertuğrul Köyü Örneği”  
Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı-Kocaeli Üniversitesi-Motif Halk Oyunları Öğretim ve Eğitim Vakfı, Halk Kültüründe Değişim Uluslararası Sempozyumu Bildirileri, Kocaeli, 17-19 Aralık, 2004, ss.326-327

<sup>4</sup> KOÇKAR, M. Tekin. a.g.e., ss.326-327

Karachays share the same cultural values with the other Caucasian tribes because they have been living in the Northern Caucasus for centuries. However, most historians, especially the French, German and Russian historians who conducted a research in Caucasus around 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century relate the origin of Karachay people to Middle-Eastern and European civilizations therefore call them non-Caucasians living in Caucasus. The following quotation from Barbaros Ünlü somewhat supports this claim: *“The most detailed information about the roots of Karachays is revealed by the Karachay historian Umar Aliyev. According to him the roots of Karachays originate from Middle Eastern and European civilizations such as Iskit, Sarmat and Alan, and also from Central Asian Turkish communities such as the Huns, Hazars, Kipchaks and Bulgars. Many words from the Alan language were found during the research conducted on the Karachay language and also on the archeological findings in the region. Hence, it is concluded that Karachay culture originates from the Alan civilization.”*<sup>5</sup>

Another research about the origin of Karachay people also relates them to the Turkic speaking civilizations and accepts them as non-caucasians. Aydın O. Erkan, a prominent researcher states in his book “Caucasian through out the History” (Tarih Boyunca Kafkasya) that the famous French archaeologist and an anthropologist Ernest Chantre shows Karachays as non-Caucasians in the 5<sup>th</sup> volume of his five volume work that is the result of his great excavation project in Caucasus.<sup>6</sup>

Although Karachays have the European and Middle-Eastern origin according to the historians and for the fact that they speak a different dialect of Turkish which belongs to the Kipchak branch of Turkish language, culturally, they resemble more Caucasian than Turkish, because of their long settlements in the Northern Caucasus. Following quotation supports this long settlement: *“Before Diaspora, Karachays were living at the hard and sloppy valleys of the highest peaks over the Caucasians, known as Elbrus Mountain. They migrated because of the wars and social unrests confronted in their region.”*<sup>7</sup>

Today, in the Russian Federation within the Republic of Northern Caucasian Regions, some Karachays reside in Karachay-Circassian Region that includes the sub-regions of Teberda, Duut, Cazlık, Uçkulan, Kart-Curt, Hurzuk, Uçköken, Cögetey and some reside in Çegem, Holam, Baksan and Bizingı of Balkar Region.



Karachays were the only Turkish speaking Muslim Caucasians who migrated to Turkey in great numbers. About 15 thousand Karachay-Balkars migrated in two different times and in two different waves. The first and relatively a small group moved to Ottoman land in 1885; the big wave followed this in 1904. During the first wave they came to Anatolia via Georgia together with their

A Map Showing Present Borders of Karachay-Cerkess and Other Caucasian Republics

<sup>5</sup> ÜNLÜ, Ömer Barbaros. Abezek: A “Choreographic Poem”, Unpublished Presentation Project, ICTM Symposium, Italy, 2001. s.1

<sup>6</sup> ERKAN, Aydın Osman. “Tarih Boyunca Kafkasya”, Çiviyazıları, İstanbul, 1999, s. 82.

<sup>7</sup> ÜNLÜ, Ömer Barbaros. “Abezek” a “Choreographic Poem”, Unpublished Presentation Project, ICTM, Italy, 2001. s.1

Caucasian neighbor Kabardeys and settled down around Eskişehir (Yazılıkaya), Kayseri (Pınarbaşı and Eğrisöğüt), Tokat and Sivas. The second wave came to Istanbul and İzmit first from Sohum Port in Abkhazia and then they separated in to different settlements around Ankara (Yağlıpınar), Eskişehir (Yakapınar), Afyon (Kilise), Akhisar (Doğlat) and Konya (Başüyük). All of these settlements were arranged and conducted by the Ottoman missionaries (Efendiler). However, Karachays did not only move to Anatolia. Some of them moved to Syria and the others selected New Jersey, USA as their new residential area after the World War II.<sup>8</sup>



### **Dances Tradition of Karachay People and Their Variations in Turkey:**

The routs of migration from Caucasia and areas of Caucasian Settlements in Turkey (Nart, 2005)

Until the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Karachays had multi-god believe system. Around this period they met with Muslim religion and by the end of the century (1782) they fully accepted this religion and the whole society became Muslim.

In the preislamic period, dance had an important place in Karachay society. They had traditions relating their old believe system which valued dancing as an important societal phenomenon. They danced for every event that carried an important meaning in the Karachay society. A wedding ceremony was celebrated with certain dances such as “Tuz Tepseu”, “Togerek Tepseu”, “Aslanbiy”, “Marako” and “Sandırak”. They danced “Apsati”, “Biynoger”, “Kiyikle” to get power before going to a war or hunting. For more rain, a better product and a successful harvest season, they danced “Gollu”, “Dolay”, “Iynay”, “İndırbay”. There were also other dances that they did to socialize with each other and entertain themselves.

Several different field researches have been done regarding Karachay dances that were performed in the past. Most of these researches were conducted around 18th and 19th centuries. They described characteristic features of the dances, their function in the society and the reason they were performed for. Muhtar Chukaevich Kudayev who completed “Karachaevo–Balkarskie Narodnie Tantsı” in 1984 gives a wide range of place to these field researches. There, N. F. Grabovskiy, talks about a gathering in Balkarya were about 20 young men and women dance arm to arm around a bon-fire moving to right direction in half circle; and the leader is replaced by the fallowing couple every time they come to a certain point indicated by the accompanying music. N. P. Tulchinskiy gives information about a dance “Togerek Tepseu” that belongs to preislamic time period. This dance was performed by a young couple alone who supposed to have an eye on each other. İ. Ivanikov and M.

<sup>8</sup> KOÇKAR, M. Tekin. “Teknolojik Gelişmelerin Halk Kültüründeki Değişime Etkisi: Ertuğrul Köyü Örneği” Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı-Kocaeli Üniversitesi-Motif Halk Oyunları Öğretim ve Eğitim Vakfı, Halk Kültüründe Değişim Uluslararası Sempozyumu Bildirileri, Kocaeli, 17-19 Aralık, 2004, ss.326-327

Kovalevskiy talk about a dance called “Coppa” that was performed to please the god of sky (cosmos) who gets angry and kills a man or an animal by his lightning. F. A. Orusbiyeva also talks about “Coppa” being performed rhythmically as a worship dance in circular formation. Susoyev in his research gives information about a very popular dance called “Abezek” which is still being performed today. R. Ortabayeva talks about a dance called “Kiyikle” that is performed by the rock called “Apsatı”. This dance is about hunting. When a young man is going hunting first time, a group of experienced hunters first perform a ritual by this rock and tell stories about hunting to prepare the young man for his first hunting experience. According to K. Azamatov Balkars had a rain ritual dance called “Suu Anası” that was performed to worship for more rain. Also, Klaphroth talks about another popular dance “Aslanbiy” that no gathering will end without performing it.<sup>9</sup>

As it was stated above, Karachays have been living in the Caucasus for centuries. For this reason, their cultural values and traditions including their dancing is almost exactly the same as the other Caucasian neighbors such as Adiges, Kabardeys, Abkhazians or Circassians. As a matter of fact, sharing the same geography, same life style and many traditions, all of the other Caucasian tribes also show very close cultural similarity. Therefore, it is not surprising that their traditional folk dancing is almost exactly the same. Thus, it is normal to see the same dances being performed by different Caucasian tribes under a different name. For example, a dance that is popular among the men through out Caucasia is named “Islamey” by Adiges, “Zilga Kaft” by Asetinians, “Lezginka” by Daghestanians and Chechenias, “Koshemek” by Nogays, “Togerek Tepseu” and “Aslanbiy” by Karachay-Balkars. Apart from slight differences of regional characteristics, the way of performing this popular dance is the same for all the Caucasian tribes.

Another dance that is very popular among all the Caucasian peoples is called “Tüz Tepseu” or “Süzölüp” by Karachay-Balkars, “Khafa” and “Zafak” by Adiges and “Honga Khaft” by Asetinians. The popularity of this lyric dance comes from its function of giving a chance to young people to meet with each other. Many other examples can be given about the dances that Caucasian peoples share. However, there are some dances that are performed by only certain tribes and might not be shared as widely among the others. For example, “Tepena or “Chepena” dance is only performed by Asetinians and Balkars. The reason for this might be the same ancestors that they come from. As they both are descendent of Alan origin. Similarly, the other tribes also have their own dances that they perform only among themselves.<sup>10</sup>

Like in many other traditionally oriented societies, dance was and still is an important part of everyday life. However, through the years some dances have been forgotten and some are already lost in the history. Moreover, they have changes in their functional value. Contrarily, many of them which are still being performed today still have the traces of the past. Also, due to long separation of the society, today there are some dances that are being performed in Turkey but not in Karachay-Cherkessia, some dances are performed there but not in Turkey.

According to information taken from M. Tekin Koçkar who is a co-presenter and a field consultant of this Project, today Karachay – Malkar (Balkar) Dances can be categorized in four groups. The first groups of dances are the preislamic dances which have not been

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<sup>9</sup> KUDAYEV, Muhtar Chukaevich. “Karachaevo-Balkarskie Narodnie Tantsı”, Izdatelstvo “Elbrus”, Nalchik, 1984, pp. 4–11.

<sup>10</sup> KUDAYEV, Muhtar Çukaeviç. a.g.e., pp.4-11.

performed for more than a century and have been forgotten in the society. About them, Muhtar Kudayev and Balkarian choreograph Mutay Ulbashev, stated in their field research that these dances were functional from preislamic period until the middle of 18<sup>th</sup> century.

**First category of dances:**

Gollu  
Kısır  
Sandırak  
Marako  
Dolay  
İynay  
İndiray  
Biynoger  
Kiyikle  
Apsatı  
Cortuul  
Cörme  
Eliya  
Bers Oynak  
Peliuan  
Boz Alasha  
Teke  
Sollou  
Solman

The second category includes the dances that are being presently performed in Caucasia only.

**Second category of dances:**

Suu Oyun,  
Aslanbiy,  
Shindik Oyun,  
Cuzuk Oyun,  
Kuzgu Oyun,  
Tepana,  
Togerek Tepseu,

The third category includes the dances that are being presently performed in Caucasia as well as in Turkey.

**Third category of dances:**

Tuz Tepseu  
İsteme (Lezginka) Tepseu  
Abezek (Wuig) Tepseu  
Kama Tepseu

The forth category of dances are the ones that are being presently performed in Turkey. Karachay – Balkars kept their dancing tradition alive through the special event which they call “Toy”. This event was and still is held for wedding ceremonies, hospitality of a visitor, sanding the young men to military or celebrating their return, young people’s social



gathering, beginning and the end of harvest season, winter entertainments and so on. At these events not only they practiced their old dances that they brought as a part of their cultural assets, but they also created new ones in Anatolia. This is why some dances which are the main focus of this presentation are only being performed in Turkey.

**Forth category of dances:**

Abezek Tepseu  
Chanchılğan  
Kama Tepseu  
Choban Tepseu  
Tuz Tepseu  
Ziya Biy Tepseu  
Ekili Kapateyna  
Üçlü Kapateyna  
Mıchkhı  
Danis  
Tunchukgan  
Cuklağan  
Calındıu  
Canngız Tepseu  
Apsuva Tepseu

**Brief Descriptions of Popular Karachay Dances Presently Performed in Turkey:**

The term “Tepseu” means to play (as in dancing) in Karachay language. There fore, every dance has its name and the term “Tepseu” to indicate its kind. In the following paragraphs, brief descriptions of five popular dances: Tüz Tepseu, Ziya Biy Tepseu, Üçlü Kapateyna, Abezek (Wuig or Wuic) Tepseu and İsteme (Lezginka) Tepseu which are given. Descriptions of the dances are taken from the field consultant M. Tekin Koçkar.

**Tuz Tepseu:**

This dance is performed by one man and one woman. It is very popular among the young people because it gives a chance to them to get to know each other. For this reason, young people are prepared to do this particular dance at every gathering.

The dance can be done by one, two or more couples at the same time. Dance starts when a young man invites a girl to dance with him. Upon his invitation, girl comes in front of him without looking at him and starts walking towards him on the tip of her feet. They start walking forward and backward and moving diagonally counting up to 8 each time also using their arms; the melody has a 4/4 time rhythm. Susoyev, who has seen this dance in its original field, describes it in his words: *“The other popular Karachay dance is the “Tuz tepseu” that*



Tuz Tepseu -2006

young people are ready to do from the morning until the midnight. This dance, I think, reanects the elop tradition of young people that is popular throughout Caucasia.”<sup>11</sup>



Tuz Tepseu from Karaçay Region  
Teberda village in 19<sup>th</sup> century (Photographer is Yermakov)

M. Tekin Koçkar states that; “This dance came out as a result of social restrictions which played an important role in the Caucasian life style. People belonging to a different social class and not wanting to relate to the others played an enormous negative role that separated Caucasian society from each other for a long time. As a result many young man and women could not get

married with each other. Even today there are families acting this way also.”<sup>12</sup>

### Ziya Biy Tepseu:

This dance is also very popular. It is done by two female and two male dancer with its special melody that also has 4/4 time rhythm. The couples first dance face to face on the tip of their toes in a circular movement; then they turn their backs to each other and repeat the same movements. Then, they come back, face to face again with the indicated section of the music and break away from each other. After turning around of themselves, they move towards each other to change places to start the dance from the top again.



Ziya Biy Tepseu - 2006

### Üçlü Kapateyna:

This dance is performed by two female and one male dancer with its special music that has 8/8 time rhythm. The male dancer starts the dance first coming out in the middle of the dance floor turning around himself. Then he goes towards the female dancers and invites them to dance with him. The female dancers walk towards him in 8 counts and then back up immediately while he walks 8 counts towards them this time. This is repeated several times

<sup>11</sup> SUSOYEV, V. M. Karachay Geograficheskoy, Bitovom Istoricheskom Otnosheniye – Volume 43, p. 68, SMOMPK, 1913. pp. 68 – 70. in KUDAYEV-Karaçayev –Balkarskie Narodnie Tantsy, Izdatelstvo “Elbrus”, Nalchik, 1984, pp.4-11.

<sup>12</sup> KOÇKAR, M. Tekin. Kafkas Halk Dansları-Öğretim Yöntem ve Teknikleri, Şamil Eğitim ve Kültür Vakfı Yayını No:2, Folklor dizisi-Yayın No:1, 1987, s.61



face to face. Then the girls move back four steps then immediately forward towards him again in 8 counts this time passing one from his right, the other one from his left side with turning their backs to each other. After changing places like this several times, they turn to opposite direction and start the dance from the beginning again.

According to M. Tekin Koçkar who is the field consultant of Karachay dances in this presentation, the specialty of this lively dance is that it is always done with one man and two women; more over, the same man can dance with several different female partners repeatedly formed in groups of two. The reason for this is to test the dancing endurance of the male dancer by making him dance nonstop for a long time. So it seems like this dance also has a some what playful function.

### **Abezek (Wuig) Tepseu:**

This dace is very popular throughout Northern Caucasia as well as in Turkey; as it is the only dance that male and female touch each other. Traditionally in no other dance in



Abezek Tepseu - 2006



Abezek dance from Balkarya,  
Orusbiy family wedding (19<sup>th</sup> century)

Caucasian society man can touch to woman while dancing. Therefore, it is more popular among the young people. It is one of the prehistoric ritual dances and has a mythological story about it. Barbaros Ünlü stated: “Dancing is one of the important social dynamics for Northern Caucasian people today as it was in the past. “TSOPPAY” which is the dance of polytheical periods has been given various names until today and now it is known as “WUIC” among the Adige community and called “ABEZEK” among Karachays. Abezek was a dance performed by Karachays to pray and ask for power from the Teyri (God) of the trees (or forests) during the period of the multi-god religion period. They were making a fire around (or near to) the black tree (it is said to be the

*oak); forming up a circle around the fire hand in hand and dancing in that way. Abezek has been the opening dance of Karachay wedding ceremonies after the acceptance of Islam as the official religion and, as a consequence of that, it came to Anatolia as a dance of wedding ceremonies. It lived in Karachay-Circassian and Kabardey-Balkar autonomous republics*



*with the name Abezek while there is also a variant called “Marako” as determined. The name Marako has not been determined among the Karachays living in Anatolia.”*<sup>13</sup>

This dance is performed in groups of men and women arm to arm mostly in circular formation. It starts when a group of men form a straight line and start pass in front of women each one inviting one to form a couple to dance with. After each man inviting his partner, they form a circle. Then they form a straight line, diagonal line, and other possible formations; also, they change places with each other in groups. Every time they form a circle, the leading couples come in the center of the circle to show their own dance that is spontaneously improvised. After these couples finish their dancing, they join to the end of the group leaving the leading to another couple. While the individual couples are dancing in the middle of the circle, the others hold a strong rhythm with pieces of wooden clappers in their hands to motivate them to dance more lively and energetically. Most of the time the groups increase the tempo, sound of the wooden clappers and give vice commands to motivate the performers. Dance continues until each couple performs their dancing in the center of the circle. The young people try to make this dance as long as possible so they can have more time to socialize with each other.

### **Isteme (Lezginka) Tepseu:**

According to M. Tekin Koçkar who is my colleague and also the field consultant for this presentation the dance “Tögerek Tepseu” used to be performed as a separate dance; but, in time it has chanced and became a part of “Isteme tepseu”. There fore, this dance has been performed with “Isteme Tepseu” even though it is a different dance of the preislamic time period.

This dance is also very popular throughout Northern Caucasia, Trans-Caucasia as well as in Turkey. As it was stated before, this dance is more known as “Lezgika”. However, different tribes and each country might name it differently according to their own language. “Isteme Tepseu” is the name for it among the Karachay people. Many different melodies in 2/4 time can accompany this particular dance because besides all the traditionally anonymous folk melodies, there are many of them composed by Caucasian musicians the recent century.

The dance has very dynamic, acrobatic and intricate movements that are taken from the hard life style of Northern Caucasian people. It is always performed by one couple man symbolizing eagle and woman a pigeon. The best known movement of this dance is man dancing on the knuckle of his toes, on his knees and performing sharp turns while following his partner.

The female partner begins the dance by leaving her friends and coming in the middle implying that she is single and has her freedom. While she is dancing, one or two male, who has an eye on her, among the young group of men, come out and follow her from behind. When the men come in the middle of the dance floor, they suddenly rise on their toes. The young girl starts dancing around them. If she does not use her arms, it is a sign that she does not care about them. However, if she moves her arms towards one of them, then that is a sign of her desire towards that man symbolizing that she has desire to share her life with him. By

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<sup>13</sup> ÜNLÜ, Ömer Barbaros. Abezek: A “Choreographic Poem”, Unpublished Presentation Project at ICTM Congress, Italy, 2001.

imitating flying of a bird, she is giving the message of her desire to fly with him accepting him as eagle. The young man who gets this message starts to dance like an eagle as a message in turn. Mean time, all the other couples around them; clap strongly to motivate their dancing in a festive manner. Following this, all the other girls pass in front of men giving a head sign invitation to dance with them. Each man who sees this message joins his partner to dance with.

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